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Schoolscapes The Newsletter

During the Training Session for Resource Persons held on Thursday, December 6 and Friday, December 7, 2001, in Saint-Hyacinthe, participants were asked to examine the systemic vision of the Québec Education Program from a guidance-oriented perspective. This edition of Schoolscapes – The Newsletter describes the activities conducted on December 7, when the social constructivist approach to the guidance process was defined by educators who were invited to study the conditions conducive to the application of this concept.

An Integrated View

By Pascale Sauvé

At the plenary session in the morning of the second day of the training session, the participants presented summaries of their discussions in Workshop 2, on the topic "Toward a Systemic View of the Québec Education Program."

Having spent more than two hours in discussion, the workshop participants provided a variety of well-thought-out, detailed models of the Québec Education Program. In almost every case, they placed the students at the centre of the model. The students' concerns, world-views, previous learnings, motivations, goals and representations were the starting point, and the other elements followed from there.

The broad areas of learning, which bring together the various subjects, were seen as the entry point into the program. As the reporter for one workshop explained, "They have to be planned and related to the educational aims." They are used to construct a real-life problem or situation, and they play an essential role, because they give meaning to the students' learnings. One group provided three keys to the broad areas of learning: "becoming aware of (questions), learning about (things) and acquiring strategies (strategies)."

Next come the subject-specific competencies, which are associated with the essential knowledges, expectations and criteria for each subject. Then, certain

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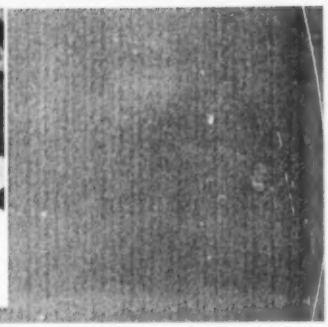

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cross-curricular competencies are chosen for development through the tasks or projects to be carried out. Finally, the pedagogical approaches—which will often be diverse and differentiated in order to respect students' individual differences—are determined and the means of evaluation—observation, checklists, tests, etc.—are selected.

All these elements are part of an integrated process that should result in a realistic, comprehensive, complex task that gives rise to the acquisition of learnings and the development of subject-specific and cross-curricular competencies. The ultimate purpose is for students to be able to transfer the learnings they acquire and the competencies they develop to their everyday lives.

Several groups constructed models in the form of a spiral in which the broad areas of learning were both the starting point and the end point. The subject areas give meaning to the learnings at the start of the process, and they also provide opportunities for students to transfer their learnings and reuse them in new contexts.

A challenge

In practice, integrating all the elements of the Québec Education Program may seem complex. As one participant admitted, "It's a real challenge!" One group illustrated its model with an image of a teacher as a juggler who has to keep several balls in the air: broad areas of learning, subject-specific and cross-curricular competencies, a paradigm shift, work in collaboration, strategic teaching, mind management, project learning, teamwork, evaluation process, competency-based approach, personal judgment, etc. "Teachers have to juggle all this," said the reporter for the group. "They have to start with two or three balls and add others as they go along."

The group sought to counter the feeling of panic some teachers experience by proposing ways to integrate all the essential elements. They stressed the importance of maintaining an overall view and avoiding a piecemeal approach. However, as one participant pointed out, "You have to give yourself time. You have to accept the fact that you won't be able to get all the balls in the air at the beginning. A paradigm shift has to take place gradually. The world is changing, and teachers have to change too."

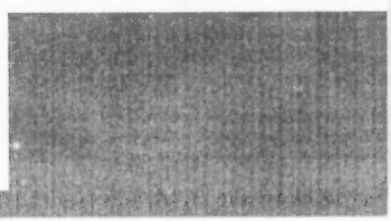
Another group used a mosaic to illustrate the integration of the elements of the Québec Education Program. "It's not easy to get all the pieces in place," said the reporter for the group. "It's an art. For some people, it's still kind of fuzzy, but it's gradually getting clearer."

One group looked at favourable conditions for the integration of all the elements. They decided that these conditions include an understanding of the Québec Education Program, guided reading, working cooperatively, support for the school team and for individual members, authentic evaluation and the application of learning.

A world-view

One group pointed out that the broad areas of learning help students develop their world-view by ensuring the relevance of their learnings. The integration of the various elements makes students aware of how they learn and helps them understand the relationship between their learnings and their everyday lives. This strengthens the connection between the school and the rest of the students' lives. Other groups felt that until they had more experience with the Québec Education Program, they would not be able to understand how it could help students develop their world-view.

It is increasingly clear that, as one participant observed, "We're starting to see changes in teachers' pedagogical concepts and practices."



Notes From the English Workshops

By Wendy Mill

The resource persons who participated in the training sessions in Saint-Hyacinthe had two major objectives: to develop a more systematic understanding of the QEP and its relation to classroom practices and to reflect on their role as teacher guides. The workshops, whether French or English, were organized in terms of these general objectives.

Challenges

On the morning of December 6, the English workshop addressed the first objective. Anne Lemay, of the Central Québec School Board, gave a presentation on working with the QEP, showing how the most recent version places greater emphasis on the cross-curricular competencies and the broad areas of learning and how these aspects are more closely intertwined with the other elements of the curriculum than they were in the earlier version. The participants looked at ways of assisting teachers in organizing the elements of content in conformity with the QEP.

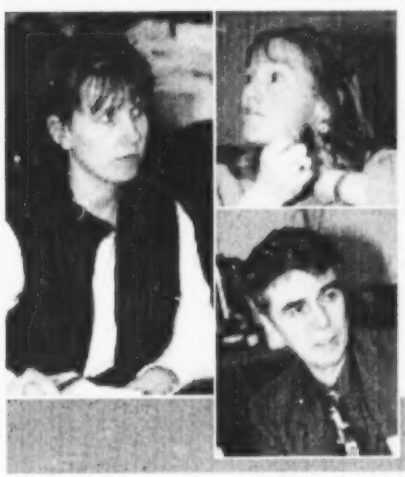
Lemay then raised the issue of the challenges teachers face in taking ownership of competency-based learning, and asked the participants to note significant challenges on cue cards, which she would collect the next day. Lemay and Janet Radoman used these cards to establish a profile of the teachers' outlook and needs. According to the cue cards and to the themes brought out in discussion during the workshops, the challenges facing teachers fall into four areas: the structure of schools, pedagogy, the QEP and making connections.

The first area concerns time and planning; logistic challenges associated with the cycle-based approach and multi-age classrooms. Another important challenge here is to get teachers to work in teams, when they are accustomed to working on their own. Finally, it was suggested that a shared leadership model requires a shift in the role of the principal, who should become more of a pedagogical leader. In an ideal situation, the principal would have an administrative assistant, and spend all of his or her time working with teachers, students and parents. This is essentially a challenge for school administrators, but it would also change the way teachers work.

The pedagogical challenges involve developing strategies to bring out the interdependence between subjects and to carry out ongoing evaluation, creating learning situations that are connected to students' lives and achieving a clear understanding of what active learning is.

The third area of challenge is to get teachers to read and become familiar with the QEP, especially its initial chapters, and to see the curriculum as a whole rather than as something that is divided into discrete sections, some of which are "their" responsibilities, and some of which "belong" to other teachers.

Certain challenges were grouped under the heading "making connections." Along these lines, teachers need to view change as a given and professional development as part of what they do. More specifically, they have to relate their own practice to the QEP, rethink their ways of doing things and of thinking, and move on. Finally, teachers need models and ongoing support in the schools.



Teacher-training models

The afternoon workshop focused on the second objective. The participants divided up into groups and engaged in "jigsaw reading"—each group read and discussed an article on teacher training, and then reported back to the workshop on the teacher-training model presented in its article, making suggestions regarding its application. By the end of the afternoon, the participants had a variety of models for scaffolding their understanding of professional development. This exercise allowed the participants to take in new ideas and to synthesize them for the whole group. Social constructivism is sometimes criticized for having an "anything goes" outlook, which can create a sense of frustration, because if all points of view are equally valid, how do you decide among them, and if you can't do that, how can you come away feeling that you are further ahead than you were beforehand? The jigsaw reading exercise developed participants' critical appreciation of the different possibilities for teacher training. As one person summed it up, it "allowed us to leave with more than we came with."

Implementation experiences
Inquiry-based projects

On December 7, the morning workshop looked at case studies of understanding and implementation of the Québec Education Program. Anne Lemay started the presentations off by reporting on the inquiry-based project approach.

Inquiry-based projects (I-BP) engage students by means of "entry points" that vary according to students' questions and needs. The projects may feature narration, numbers or scientific approaches, may examine beliefs or frameworks of meaning, or may be aesthetic or experiential. They are all, however, "wrapped around a key concept guided by the teacher." Lemay's concept focused on a fruit fly ("Fruity") and more generally, bugs, the idea being, "they bug people, but let's take a closer look."

This approach builds on prior knowledge by asking "What do we know about _____?" and "What do we want to learn about _____?" In keeping with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, I-BP allow learners to construct their knowledge in various ways—by means of hands-on activities, by interacting with peers, by using creativity, and so on. In addition to being adaptable to different interests and types of intelligence, I-BP can be used with students with different needs and at-risk students. This requires that teachers understand and

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The Role of the Resource Person

By Claudine St-Germain

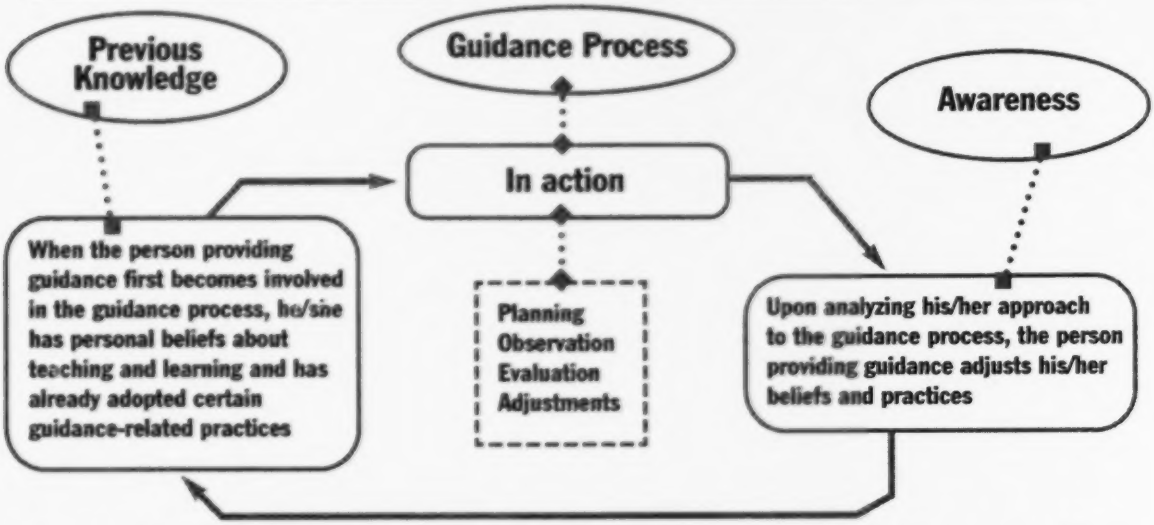
Louise Lafortune's presentation centred on the role that resource persons are called upon to play in their school environment. "The concept of providing guidance (in accordance with a social constructivist approach) refers to a type of support that focuses on knowledge-building with the people you are guiding as they interact with you, but also among themselves," she explained. According to this concept, those receiving guidance must call certain ideas into question—and ask questions that are closely related to those resource persons ask themselves.

Louise Lafortune then examined the competencies needed to ensure that guidance is provided according to a social constructivist approach. General competencies include: mastering interpersonal communication skills (being open to others, providing clear instructions, promoting mutual respect, etc.); knowing how to lead and manage a group; and providing learning experiences that reflect theoretical perspectives. "The expression of theoretical perspectives (conceptions of teaching and learning) is important if the guidance process is to be helpful," explained Louise Lafortune. While it isn't necessary for everyone to share the same perspective, different views must nevertheless be made known and open for discussion.

Other competencies, however, are specific to a social constructivist approach. The first is the ability to have people experience a sort of "cognitive imbalance." "Often, these people want to know and understand everything after the first 15 minutes," said Louise Lafortune. "We must encourage them to let their thoughts flow freely and visualize the information as though they were pieces of a puzzle. Personally, I try to banish the expression "Do you understand?" from my vocabulary. We usually ask this question after making a few introductory statements, but it really is a distortion of the word 'understand'."

The second specific competency is risk-taking. "We cannot easily ask others to take risks if we ourselves do not," emphasized Ms. Lafortune. Finally, developing awareness is probably the most difficult competency to acquire, according to Louise Lafortune. "We must first become aware of our own approach to guiding people if we are to teach this technique to others and thus help them develop an awareness of their own particular way of interacting with students in the classroom."

THE DYNAMICS OF THE GUIDANCE PROCESS FROM A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE


Previous Knowledge
Guidance Process
Awareness
In action
When the person providing guidance first becomes involved in the guidance process, he/she has personal beliefs about teaching and learning and has already adopted certain guidance-related practices
Planning
Observation
Evaluation
Adjustments
Upon analyzing his/her approach to the guidance process, the person providing guidance adjusts his/her beliefs and practices

From a social constructivist perspective, the dynamics of the guidance process are such that the person providing guidance continues to take a certain approach to guidance or chooses another approach based on an awareness that his/her understanding of the process has evolved or on his/her interactions with those he/she is guiding.

© Louise Lafortune 2001 based on Lafortune et St-Pierre (1996) and Lafortune et Deaudelin (2001)

Conditions and methods pertaining to successful guidance practices

Successful guidance practices do require a certain pedagogical culture, meaning a basic knowledge of teaching, learning and educational realities. Other conditions deemed necessary for effective guidance are the emotional context, the importance of experimenting, adjustments to training and allotting the time needed, as well as follow-up and continuity.

"I believe that the last two conditions are of particular importance," says Louise Lafortune. "We cannot assume after a half day's training that we have completed the guidance process; there must be follow-up and continuity as well. We must not confuse guiding, training and conducting activities." The professor also insisted on the importance of sticking to the main theme in spite of any adjustments that might be made during the training session. Resource persons must remain focused and keep their objectives in mind, even if there may be different ways of approaching the task at hand.

Louise Lafortune then focused on the specific actions that underlie the guidance process: calling upon prior knowledge (not merely recalling it, but reviewing it so that people can become aware of their particular learning path); building together through active means; generating, identifying and making the most of sociocognitive conflicts (not only creating them, but also learning to identify actual examples of such conflict in interactions within a group, while using the experience to demonstrate the group's progress); comparing each person's perceptions (without being judgmental, but as an exercise in critical thinking); and benefiting from this awareness.

There are four methods available to provide guidance: observing (to further the mutual knowledge-building process); questioning (to spark the thinking process and generate ideas); self-evaluating (to become aware of the knowledge we have constructed, our adjustments and our progress); and synthesizing (carefully taking into account the knowledge constructed and verifying it with the group). "Asking questions is particularly important, in my opinion," said Louise Lafortune. It is something we don't give much thought to since we generally think of questions as spontaneous acts. But, we can make these questions part of our thought processes by observing ourselves as we ask other people questions. For instance, do we ask questions that can be answered simply with a "yes" or a "no" or questions that require the person to elaborate, and so on?

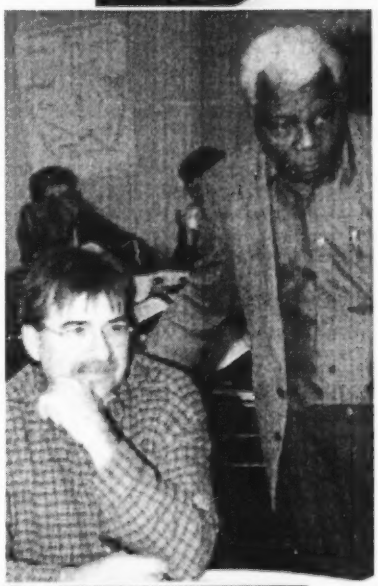
Aiming for successful integration

After assessing the previous day's workshops, Louise Lafortune reflected upon the integration of the components of the Québec Education Program (the theme of one of the workshops) and drew a parallel with the integration of learning by the people we are guiding. She divides the integration process into three stages. The first stage involves the assumption that the competencies and broad areas of learning are being applied. "Certain activities have an important intrinsic value and have the potential to develop almost all cross-curricular competencies. But if we do not go beyond these activities, we will not know if the student (or the person we are guiding) is really applying these competencies. Their use is therefore presumed." To foster real development, specific action must be taken by the resource person. Furthermore, we must heighten awareness of the process, the learning path and the necessary adjustments, and so on.

"For example, let's suppose that we want people to think about the comparison between their beliefs and practices. If we ask them to simply think about this in a general way, I believe we remain at a basic level. We move toward development only when people reflect upon their own beliefs and are able to make a connection with their individual practices. At the third stage (i.e. awareness), we try to point out the contradictions and inconsistencies. It's a way of engaging in metacognition."

Metacognition, according to Louise Lafortune, is a reflective examination that contributes to the mutual knowledge-building process. It requires us to observe without being judgmental (attitudes), take action, talk about and analyze what we have done (actions), and deal with adjustments, risks and cognitive imbalances (competencies).

In closing, Louise Lafortune raised three questions: What degree of cognitive imbalance can one create in a group where people have had different experiences and expressed varying doubts? How does one adjust one's actions so as to guide without controlling and still remain focused on the central theme? How does one combine rigour with flexibility or create an open structure? These questions certainly provide food for thought ...



Favourable conditions for guidance

By Pascale Sauvé

To conclude the training session for resource persons, three guests shared their visions of favourable conditions for guidance. Their points of view were based on their own experiences and reflections and on those of the workshop participants.

Madeleine Lanthier, educational consultant at the Commission scolaire au Cœur-des-Vallées, spoke of a colleague's suggestions which have greatly influenced her own guidance practices. This colleague was interested in the authenticity of the practices used—"which is a concern not only for teachers, but for all who interact with others," Lanthier pointed out. Her colleague felt that, first and foremost, all actions must be based on reality—they must reflect real life situations and be meaningful. "We know if our actions are meaningful by asking ourselves how they affect people," explained Lanthier. "Furthermore, these actions must be useful now and in the long term, and must present a real intellectual challenge in terms of learning and raising questions." Bringing a sense of intellectual curiosity to the guidance process sparks people's interest in learning and experimenting. Another essential condition is that the guidance process must have a human dimension—"it must speak to us as human beings," explained Lanthier.

Lanthier reported the essential conditions that were identified in her workshop. First, there was the question of time. "It takes time to learn and to develop competencies," she maintained. "Time is a needed ally. Allowing time to respect your own pace and that of others is important. We can't stay in the same place, but have to realize that change takes time." She also spoke of the need to have a group vision and a personal vision, to use the most inclusive language possible and to remain open to the unexpected. "People may present other theories that contribute to the knowledge-building process and promote a successful reform."

Another condition is the ability to manage stress—which often originates from outside sources such as parents or the media. "We must learn to manage stress, not by denying its existence, but by using it to develop our critical thinking skills and to seek solutions to the problems that arise," she said. She felt it might be interesting for teams in a particular area to share their answers to certain questions—though not for distribution at large. "Often, people who resist change will rely solely on what they hear," she noted. "So, we should not be afraid to discuss the changes."

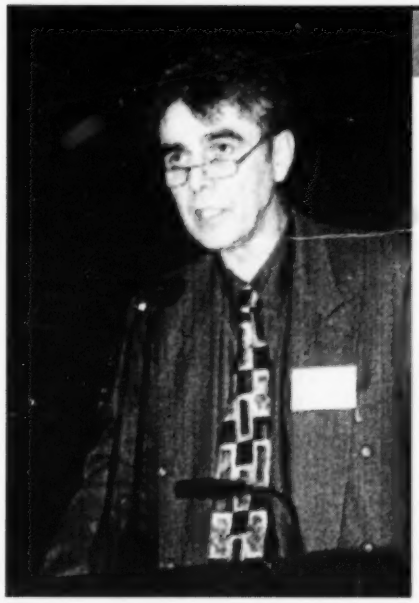
In order to make progress, we must take risks—some calculated in advance, others not. "Often, we see the benefits of risk-taking only in hindsight," she said. Another favourable condition is the willingness to explore new resources. "When assigned responsibility for something, people may tend to feel they have to do it all themselves. I believe, on the contrary, that it's more interesting to go looking for resources elsewhere." Adequate follow-up procedures and techniques for applying learning were other conditions for success that she cited.

"An interesting idea suggested by a colleague on my team is to rethink the place of the various disciplines in an interdisciplinary context—not to exclude but to include—and to give each discipline a specific role in order to take an overall look at the education we are providing."

Motivation and competence

The second guest speaker to share his views on favourable conditions for successful guidance was Jean Bruneau, principal of the Polyvalente de Lévis in the Commission scolaire des Navigateurs. His primary concern was student success.

"During these two days of training, we spoke of the who, what, and how of the guidance process," he said. "Who includes the school administration, teachers, staff, students, and ultimately, parents and the community. What and how will be organized according to the group being guided. Therefore, a first condition would be to use differentiated guidance practices, adapted accordingly."



Jean Bruneau said he is concerned about the current school organization in secondary schools, particularly in Cycle Two, in which teachers and administrators are assigned mechanically and special education services are seen as essential. "We could have an excellent organization, but it's not always possible because of certain norms," he said.

Jean Bruneau is also concerned about the school calendar and the instability of work teams. "When we form our teaching team on August 21, a week before the students return to school, and find only 30 per cent of our teaching staff coming back, it is difficult to think in terms of a stable work team and continuity," he stated. He also feels that the fact that students must change classrooms and classes for each subject doesn't allow teachers to get to know, or even recognize, their students, which makes it difficult to establish a real relationship with them.

Bruneau also discussed the effects of the way information on the education reform is provided. "For example, statements made by the Minister or the Premier at press conferences can have a destabilizing effect," he said. "They have a serious impact, especially in times of change or crisis. It's difficult when we lack the needed political support."

What do Jean Bruneau and his team see as favourable conditions for the guidance process? First, stable teaching teams and classes. "Having a class of students for a longer time, even for more than a year, would allow teachers to see their students grow," he emphasized. He also proposed the creation of a guiding team of teachers, who would work closely with administrators and education consultants to implement the reform and provide information.

His suggestion to school administrators is to limit the number of persons to whom guidance is provided. "Because of time constraints, it is impossible to provide guidance to everyone, especially on an individual basis. Consequently, we have choices to make—at least in the beginning." In Bruneau's view, different approaches should be used with different types of people. "People whose competencies just need a little improvement and who are motivated are the ones that school administrators should tend to," he explained. "We should be guiding those who are competent but whose motivation could be higher. People who are motivated and who don't need further training should be made part of the guiding team and given support. For the group who need both motivation and training, I believe the school administration should wait until it has time to deal with them."

Experimentation and time

Louise Lafortune, professor at the Université du Québec in Trois-Rivières and researcher at the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur les apprentissages et le développement en éducation (CIRAD), presented her observations on the favourable conditions identified by participants in the training session.

"We must remember that when you take action, you have to experiment," she said. "Teams need a model they can use to follow their experiments." In other words, you need to keep a record. "The record should include a description of the action, the students' reactions, a self-evaluation and any adjustments. In these four elements, you have what you've done, how you see others, how you see yourself and what you plan to do next."

What favourable conditions should be provided for training? "First, you must not be caught off balance when someone loses interest, walks out of a workshop or drops out of training. Even with a more traditional approach, you would not capture everyone's interest. If you hoped to reach all the students in a class with the perfect approach to teaching, you wouldn't succeed! The same applies to the guidance process." Obviously, when people leave, she pointed out, you have to ask yourself questions in order to understand what happened and why they left.

Another condition cited by Lafortune was sufficient time for people to feel comfortable with new ideas. "In unfamiliar situations, people are caught off-balance and often reach for ready-made answers. You have to allow time for them to adapt and regain their equilibrium." Two related conditions are the ability to be explicit with others and with yourself, and to question yourself and others—particularly about your successful and not-so-successful endeavours.

Lafortune quoted a comment by one of her collaborators: "We need to learn to give ourselves time." "By this he meant that too often we bring a training session or guidance process to a close too quickly," she explained. "According to him, we should take an extra five minutes to reconnect with the energy of the people we have been working with all day."

Is guidance a cross-disciplinary competency? "It may very well be, but it cannot be developed or exercised out of thin air," she said. "You need content." She considers it too ambitious to think that the education reform or the Québec Education Program could serve as the content. The important thing, she concluded, is to define your goals, choose your objectives and target the competencies you want to develop through guidance. ■

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take into account the students' differences and give the students choices, negotiating and building the project with them. Individual and group responsibility in the inquiry process give students a sense of belonging, while tiered activities enable all students to attain a measure of success.
Inquiry-based projects "naturally integrate cross-curricular competencies and engage learners by enabling them to make direct connections to their world." Students are drawn into work that is meaningful to them and that is linked with elements of the program, assuming that the key concept is effectively used to interrelate them. Concept-based learning—the use of the key concept—makes the difference between differentiated instruction and a bunch of disparate projects.

Although Lemay stressed the importance of planning projects, in response to a participant's question about whether it is preferable to choose an activity first or to target a specific competency and then choose an activity that will contribute to the development of that competency, she thought either approach could work. Certainly teachers can decide in advance which cross-curricular competency or broad area of learning to work on.

In her response to another participant, Lemay argued that although many teachers already had an integrated and planned approach to teaching prior to the introduction of the new curriculum, this approach was largely teacher-centred: a strong understanding of the constructivist approach and of differentiated and competency-based learning are essential if teachers are to move toward learner-centred classrooms. A firm grasp of the theoretical bases of the QEP is as important as a thorough knowledge of the curriculum itself.

Overcoming resistance

Stephanie Vucko of Riverside School Board gave an implementation report, beginning with the teachers' resistance in the first year, and what was done to deal with it. Resistance was strongest regarding evaluation. A continuum-based report card, which establishes by computerized means the stage a student has reached in developing competencies—along the lines of descriptive scales—was tried. Portfolio assessment, which does not measure students against any fixed standards, was well received and was thought to increase students' motivation. But evaluation as a whole remains a sensitive issue.

During the 2001-2002 year, a one-on-one approach was used for teacher training. This intensive approach was greatly appreciated. A curriculum reform committee, with active union participation, also operated during this school year. This represented a positive development, as it is important for all partners—not just administrators and education consultants—to be involved.

The Resource Teachers Network

While working as a resource teacher, Edith Clarke felt isolated. She was not well integrated with the regular teachers, and she felt a need to network with other resource teachers. Later, when she became an education consultant, she vowed to create a forum where resource teachers could share their concerns and develop collaborative skills for teaming up with regular teachers.

With help from the Director General of the English-Montréal School Board, she chose nine resource teachers who worked in widely dispersed locations and held different perspectives. Out of this initial group there emerged, in 1999, a lead group interested in establishing a Resource Teachers Network (RTN).

The RTN holds workshops on a variety of topics: the curriculum reform; the roles of regular and resource teachers; individual students' needs and group needs; differentiated instruction and how to help children with special needs succeed in regular classrooms; developing a more consistent support model for all schools.

Initially, only resource teachers attended the workshops. This has changed. Regular teachers and principals now participate and acknowledge the need for strategies to facilitate teacher cooperation. This trend towards broader participation and greater support for teamwork both reflects and contributes enormously to the RTN's effectiveness, since one of the problems it originally sought to address was the resource teachers' sense of isolation and the difficulty they experienced in working in cooperation with other school staff. Another network has recently been set up for part-time resource teachers.

The RTN's Web site address is:
www.emsb.qc.ca/recit/rtn/meet1/history.htm

Dynamics of the guidance process

In the afternoon, several people who had attended Louise Lafortune's presentation on the dynamics of the guidance process reported back to the English workshop, which then discussed how Lafortune's report related to their own experience as guides or facilitators, and related this discussion to the earlier one about different teacher training models. On the whole, the feeling was that Lafortune's reflections on her experiences confirmed the experiences of the participants, and enabled them to put labels on perceptions they already had about the guidance process. The discussion focused largely on the need to become aware of what learners—in this case teachers—already know, and to work with that to take them from where they are to where they could be as teachers.

www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/virage

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